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Summary record of the 25th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Monday, 6 November 2017, at 10 a.m.

Chair:	Mr. Almahmoud (Vice-Chair)	(United Arab Emirates)
later:	Mr. Ramírez Carreño (Chair)	(Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela)
later:	Mr. Almahmoud (Vice-Chair)	(United Arab Emirates)

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In the absence of Mr. Ramírez Carreño (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela), Mr. Almahmoud (United Arab Emirates), Vice-Chair, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Agenda item 53: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (*continued*) (A/72/13/Rev.1, A/72/313, A/72/326, A/72/332 and A/72/334)

1. **Mr. Gertze** (Namibia) said that, since its creation in 1949, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) had provided essential services to Palestine refugees in Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and the West Bank, and had remained a stabilizing factor in the region. Over the previous year, it had provided education to 515,260 children and over 8.5 million primary health-care consultations. In Syria alone, it had provided cash and food assistance to 430,000 refugees. In Gaza, where the decade-long blockade continued to have a severe impact, the Agency had been assisting with reconstruction efforts following the hostilities of 2014.

2. Despite the significant steps taken by the Agency to strengthen its financial control, its funding had not kept pace with the rising number of refugees and their growing needs, and its budgetary difficulties were exacerbating concerns among refugees about the ability of the international community to address their most basic needs. There were currently more than 5.3 million Palestine refugees, who accounted for approximately 25 per cent of refugees worldwide. By 2020, the Palestine refugee population was expected to grow to 6.4 million. The demands placed upon UNRWA, and therefore its financial needs, would only increase in the years to come. His delegation called on the Israeli Government to cease all construction of settlements in the occupied territories and to end its ongoing destruction of Palestinian homes and infrastructure. It welcomed the reconciliation agreement signed between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority and hoped that the agreement would create momentum for the resumption of negotiations by all parties in order to achieve peace, development and ultimately a two-State solution, with East Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Palestine.

3. **Mr. Mounzer** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that the situation of the Palestine refugees was not merely a humanitarian catastrophe, but also a political, legal and ethical issue. Over 5 million Palestine refugees had been systematically displaced from their territory by the racist Israeli occupation which violated their most basic rights, including their right to live in their own homes in their own territory. Since 1949, UNRWA had witnessed the suffering of Palestinians and had itself been a target of the Israeli occupation forces, which had murdered Agency staff and destroyed its schools even as refugees were sheltering inside them during brutal Israeli attacks.

4. The Arab host States that had welcomed Palestine refugees should also be regarded as donor States, given the level of assistance that they were called upon to provide. His country would treat the refugees living on its soil as Syrian citizens, without discrimination, until such time as they could exercise their right of return. The Government spared no effort to protect Palestine refugees from attacks by armed terrorist groups, particularly Palestinians in the Yarmouk camp, who were being besieged from within by Daesh and the Nusrah Front and other armed takfirist terrorist groups. On several occasions, UNRWA had been unable to deliver assistance to that camp because its staff had been barred entry by armed groups. What the terrorists were doing to Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic was part of a larger plot to disperse them still further afield in order to prevent them from ever returning to their homes in accordance with the relevant international resolutions.

5. The Syrian Arab Republic had contributed approximately 45 billion Syrian pounds to assist Palestine refugees in 2016. His Government firmly rejected all cuts to UNRWA education, emergency and social services, which would constitute a violation of international law. The United Nations and donor countries should act swiftly to resolve the Agency's financial crisis and provide it with sufficient and sustained funding to continue its work. The gleeful claims by the Israeli media that the United States and Israel had succeeded in racking up the financial deficit of UNRWA was further evidence that the Agency's financial crisis constituted a humanitarian, legal and political disaster, since those actions formed part of a broader strategy to eliminate the issue of the Palestinians' right of return by disposing of UNRWA and incorporating its functions into the scope of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a strategy which his delegation categorically rejected. It was crucial for UNRWA to pursue its activities in accordance with General Assembly resolution 302 (IV), which had established the Agency, and General Assembly resolution 194 (III), which guaranteed Palestine refugees compensation and the right of return.

6. **Mr. Elshandawily** (Egypt) said that UNRWA played a vital role by providing Palestine refugees with health care and other essential services. The education that it provided for Palestinians living under occupation

was particularly important as it was free from the destructive radical ideologies that were poisoning minds throughout the region. The international community had a responsibility to support the Agency's work until a just and lasting solution was found to the Palestinian question, in accordance with the relevant United Nations resolutions. The Agency's continuing financial crisis also warranted the international community's full attention, as funding challenges — exacerbated by severe conditions in the Middle East — continued to impede its ability to discharge its mandate and responsibilities towards Palestine refugees. As host States struggled with burdens exceeding the Agency's budget several times over, they could not be expected to incur additional responsibilities. Egypt therefore supported all proposals aimed at providing sufficient, predictable and sustained funding for UNRWA and, as Chair of the Agency's Advisory Commission, it would do its utmost to achieve those goals.

7. **Mr. Rivero Rosario** (Cuba) said that, despite operating with a deficit, UNRWA had been able to deliver human development and humanitarian assistance rapidly and effectively by drawing on its operational strengths, in particular its 30,000-strong workforce, the majority of whom were Palestine refugees and members of the communities they served. Nevertheless, his delegation was concerned at the Agency's critical financial situation and called for sufficient resources from the regular budget to be allocated to UNRWA so that it could continue meeting the needs and protecting the rights of Palestine refugees. In that context, his Government rejected the actions of some States which had called into question the humanitarian assistance provided by UNRWA and were threatening to withhold their financial support for political reasons. It urged donors and stakeholders to continue making contributions to the Agency in order to achieve a sustainable and stable financial situation that allowed basic programmes to be preserved until the question of the Palestine refugees had been settled in a just manner. Cuba would continue to support a comprehensive, just and lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of a two-State solution which allowed the Palestinians to exercise their right to self-determination and to establish a free, independent and sovereign State within the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, as well as their right of return.

8. **Mr. Islam** (Bangladesh) said that his delegation appreciated the Agency's relentless efforts to provide sustainable, quality services to the Palestine refugees and encouraged efforts to further strengthen its capacity to fulfil its humanitarian and human development mandate. His Government remained seriously concerned about the safety of Agency staff. To date, 30 UNRWA staff members had been killed and 26 were missing. There could be no justification for killing or abducting United Nations personnel, nor for the wanton destruction of emergency shelters, homes, schools and infrastructure that supported innocent civilians, including refugees and other vulnerable populations. The protection and safety of United Nations personnel serving in volatile and complex situations must be accorded the highest priority, and the Security Council should remain seized of that critical matter. It was also concerning that the occupying Power made it difficult for UNRWA staff to discharge their duties and often disregarded the immunities and privileges to which UNRWA staff members were entitled.

9. It was particularly worrying that the Agency's shortfall had risen to $126 million and that it had been forced to borrow $20 million. International donors were urged to continue supporting the cause of the Palestine refugees by providing increased, predictable and sustainable resources for UNRWA operations. His delegation welcomed the consultations held by the UNRWA Advisory Commission on how to address the budget shortfall. His Government would continue to do its part in advocating for the Palestine refugees and reaffirmed its solidarity with the protracted plight of those refugees around the world.

10. **Mr. Zehnder** (Switzerland), expressing concern at the crisis affecting more than 5.3 million Palestine refugees, said that UNRWA must be provided with predictable resources so that it could fulfil its mandate. It was regrettable that in 2017 the Agency was once again facing a major deficit. In 2016, the General Assembly had recognized the seriousness of the Agency's funding problems by adopting resolution 71/93 requesting the Secretary-General to facilitate broad consultations to remedy that situation. The resulting recommendations had been widely supported by Member States and the Swiss Government called for them to be implemented rapidly. Strengthening UNRWA was a collective responsibility of Member States and they must redouble their efforts to ensure that the Agency's funding was sufficient, predictable and sustained for the duration of its mandate. In that connection, the draft resolution on the Agency's operations (A/C.4/72/L.19) was a major step forward.

11. Switzerland helped to fund the implementation of the Agency's resource mobilization strategy and called on all States to do the same. That strategy aimed to give the Agency the means to strengthen and broaden its donor and partner base in order to ensure its financial stability. In 2017, his country had provided 22 million

Swiss francs, including a contribution of 3 million Swiss francs which had recently been made to the Agency's programme budget. Further to the Secretary-General's recommendations, Switzerland had also committed to making a multi-year contribution so that UNRWA could benefit from greater flexibility and predictability in the fulfilment of its mandate.

12. *Mr. Ramirez Carreño (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) took the Chair.*

13. **Mr. Alkhaniny** (Saudi Arabia) said that, in 2017 alone, his country had donated over $51 million towards UNRWA housing, education and health projects and $1 million to provide food aid to Palestine refugees. It had also pledged a further $36.9 million for 2018. Those contributions were in addition to the country's annual donation of $2 million. Saudi Arabia had also been an active member of the Agency's Advisory Commission since 2005.

14. The Secretary-General was urged to take immediate action to remedy the Agency's enormous budget shortfalls. His delegation welcomed the efforts of the General Assembly towards the adoption of a resolution to ensure sufficient, predictable and sustained funding for UNRWA from the regular budget of the United Nations. The broad support expressed for the draft resolution by the majority of Member States, including the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Group of 77 and China and the European Union demonstrated the international community's firm commitment to alleviate the suffering of Palestine refugees. His delegation hoped that all parties would continue to rally their efforts to achieve consensus on that issue, especially given that there was no alternative to the support provided by UNRWA. The education and employment opportunities that the Agency created formed the first line of defence against extremist ideologies and helped to restore a sense of hope and dignity among young Palestinians.

15. The enormity of the task performed by UNRWA since its establishment in 1949 was testament to how severely the Palestinians had suffered at the hands of the ongoing hostile occupation of their land by Israel, which continued to disregard their most basic rights as guaranteed by international treaties and United Nations resolutions, thus compounding their suffering as refugees, particularly in the case of those who had been displaced to Jordan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Lebanon. His Government would continue to support UNRWA in its efforts to alleviate the suffering of the Palestinian people until such time as the refugees could return to their homes and receive compensation in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III). The tragedy of the Palestinian people would not end as long as Israel continued to occupy Arab territory and violate international law. The roots of the problem must be addressed by an Israeli withdrawal to the lines of 4 June 1967 and the establishment of an independent State of Palestine with Jerusalem as its capital.

16. **Mr. Abbas** (Lebanon) said that, since its establishment in 1949, UNRWA had played a stabilizing role for millions of Palestine refugees, but its work was threatened by the Agency's dire financial situation, which was exacerbated by the reprehensible actions of Israel in the occupied territories, including its unlawful blockade of Gaza and its repression of the Palestinian population in the West Bank. Without sufficient, predictable and sustained funding, the Agency would be unable to maintain its services, which would lead to increased crime, poverty and violent extremism, and could threaten the security of host countries. The lack of funding was also preventing the reconstruction of the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp and was preventing 10,000 internally displaced Palestine refugees from returning to the camp. It was time for the international community to adequately address the Agency's recurring funding crisis.

17. Lebanon was host to 400,000 Palestine refugees who had fled Palestine as a result of the Israeli-induced 1948 Palestinian exodus or the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem in 1967. Despite its limited capabilities, Lebanon had taken measures to alleviate some of the challenges facing Palestine refugees, including allowing them to access around seventy professions in the Lebanese labour market that had previously been reserved exclusively for Lebanese nationals and adopting a law, in 2010, giving them the right to a free work permit. The Agency should have all the international political and financial support that it needed to fulfil its mandate. Pending a just solution in the Middle East that would end the Israeli occupation of Arab lands, establish an independent and viable Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital and allow for the return of Palestine refugees to their homeland, the international community had a collective responsibility to continue its support for UNRWA and the Palestine refugees.

18. **Ms. Samarasinghe** (Sri Lanka) said that her delegation appreciated the Agency's tireless efforts to provide vital services and emergency assistance to some 5.3 million Palestine refugees and was deeply saddened by the scores of Agency staff who had died or gone missing. Her Government condemned all threats and attacks against Agency personnel.

19. The high standard of education provided by UNRWA in the Occupied Palestinian Territory encouraged children and youth to turn away from violence and aspire to a better future, even under the dire circumstances. The Agency's work, therefore, was directly linked to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Her Government was deeply concerned at the human rights situation and the daily violence and humiliation endured by Palestinian women and children. After nearly 11 years of a land and sea blockade and repeated escalations of hostilities, and in spite of limited educational opportunities, unemployment, lack of access to health care and other challenges, the Agency's work provided Palestinians living in Gaza with a semblance of hope. By giving the refugees access to education and other services, the Agency kept refugees from moving, thereby playing a stabilizing role. However, UNRWA was facing the most serious financial crisis in its history; its continued underfunding would give rise to a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions and would threaten the services rendered to the Palestinian people, with serious consequences for peace and security in an especially volatile region. The international community must therefore increase its contributions so that the Agency could continue its work.

20. While Sri Lanka fully supported the Agency's work, a just and peaceful political solution was the only legitimate means of securing the future of Palestine refugees, and her Government supported the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to statehood and the achievement of a two-State solution on the basis of the 1967 borders.

21. **Mr. Aoki** (Japan) said that the role of UNRWA was more crucial than ever given the increasingly severe conditions faced by Palestine refugees, particularly in connection with the severe electricity crisis in Gaza. His Government appreciated the Agency's frontline efforts and offered its heartfelt condolences on the death of Agency staff in the line of duty. Japan had supported UNRWA since before it had joined the United Nations and the Government had recently announced a contribution of $20 million. Japan had been pleased to welcome the Commissioner-General on a visit to exchange views with senior officials, the private sector, the media and Japanese non-governmental organizations working in Palestine and to raise awareness among the Japanese people regarding how Japanese assistance contributed to improving the livelihood of Palestine refugees. His Government recognized that the Agency lacked the resources required to provide the necessary services regularly, but nonetheless hoped that the Agency would uphold fiscal discipline and implement its projects within the limits of the voluntary contributions that had been provided. The Agency should look for potential donors among international organizations and in the private sector, including among members of the Palestinian diaspora and Palestinian firms. The international community must not forget the plight of Palestine refugees, and his Government would continue to provide reliable assistance in cooperation with UNRWA.

22. **Mr. Yardley** (Australia) said that his Government valued the Agency's stabilizing role as it provided essential services and humanitarian assistance to Palestine refugees in a region characterized by volatile security, political and economic conditions. His delegation acknowledged the Agency's commitment to Palestine refugees in Syria, given the perilous operating environment there, and in Gaza, where staff worked in very challenging humanitarian conditions. It also recognized the commitment of the Agency's leadership to reduce its budget deficits which, if not addressed as a matter of priority, threatened the Agency's viability. His Government supported the Agency's efforts to broaden its donor base so that it could be less dependent on the core group of traditional donors. However, seeking assessed contributions from the Organization's regular budget to fund the Agency was neither sustainable nor practical. Australia had contributed to UNRWA regularly for more than 50 years and had made a multi-year commitment to contribute $80 million, which would enable the Agency to plan ahead. His delegation encouraged other donors to consider multi-year funding arrangements.

23. The Agency's neutrality was critical to its operations. While his Government acknowledged the Agency's condemnation and swift action in response to the recent discovery of tunnels underneath two Agency-funded schools in Gaza, the incident had highlighted the need for the Agency to exercise continued vigilance in all aspects of its work. The long-term future for Palestine refugees ultimately rested on a political solution that resulted in Israel and a Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security within internationally recognized borders. His Government called on both sides to resume direct negotiations towards that end as soon as possible.

24. **Mr. Krasna** (Israel) said that his Government recognized the contribution that UNRWA made to the welfare of Palestine refugees and it had worked with the Agency on hundreds of projects. Nonetheless, in view of the dramatic increase in the number of refugees who were eligible for the Agency's services, it seemed that rather than enabling them to restart their lives, the Agency was perpetuating their plight. Education played

a vital role in helping refugees to achieve their full potential. The Agency's use of humanitarian funding to perpetuate a one-sided narrative about the conflict in the region was deeply concerning as it poisoned educational programmes with propaganda. Instead of teaching tolerance and inclusion, the Agency often promoted a controversial political agenda through campaigns in support of the so-called 'right of return' for millions of Palestinians. The question of Palestine refugees could be resolved only through direct bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. The Agency's political advocacy was therefore inappropriate and undermined efforts to find a political solution.

25. The recent report of the United Nations country team entitled "Gaza: Ten Years Later" had detailed the many ways in which Hamas exerted control over the territory and the people there, including by diverting humanitarian assistance towards rearmament, committing human rights violations and abusing every humanitarian measure introduced by Israel. It was therefore puzzling that, in its report, the Agency made no mention of the internationally designated terror organization and its impact on Agency operations. His Government expected the Agency to uphold the standard of balanced reporting and neutrality required of all United Nations bodies and called on it to provide impartial, accurate reports on the situation on the ground in the future.

26. By digging tunnels underneath Agency-funded schools, Hamas had put children and Agency staff in great danger and had jeopardized the Agency's mission. Member States must universally and unequivocally condemn such actions, which laid the groundwork for future terrorist actions against innocent civilians and put his country's security at risk, and must take action to ensure that there were no other cases. His delegation wished to know what steps were being taken to prevent tunnels from being dug underneath other Agency facilities in Gaza or elsewhere. The discovery in 2017 of two active Hamas members who had been employed by the Agency had raised questions about the Agency's vetting process and efforts to prevent the politicization of its activities. Such cases must be reported accurately to Member States and not treated as a simple administrative matter, which discredited the decision makers. His Government would remain vigilant and keep Hamas from being perceived as a legitimate interlocutor as long as it continued to reject existing agreements, promote terror and deny the right of the State of Israel to exist.

27. The Government of Israel hoped for a better future for Israelis and Palestinians alike and was dismayed that its extensive cooperation with the Agency was scarcely mentioned in the report. While Hamas was doing everything it could to hinder reconstruction of the Gaza Strip, Israel was working with the Agency to meet humanitarian needs and support reconstruction efforts there through the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism. Israel aspired to peace and the Government hoped that the creation of an environment conducive to economic activity would encourage the resumption of direct and unconditional negotiations and the realization of two States for two peoples, living side by side in peace and security. His Government believed that the vast majority of people sought to provide security, education and health care and ensure a safe and peaceful environment for their children.

28. **Mr. Nasir** (Maldives) said that UNRWA had given hope to people in war-torn Syria and the Occupied Palestinian Territories and had protected the basic rights and dignity of the Palestinian people, providing them with humanitarian assistance, especially the most vulnerable groups. While it was encouraging that many countries continued to make generous donations to UNRWA, the uncertainty created by the Agency's dependence on donor funds posed a huge challenge. It was crucial for the continuity of the Agency's projects and relief efforts that its funding was sufficient, predictable and sustained, and his Government welcomed the commitment of the Secretary-General in that regard.

29. The Agency's tireless efforts to deliver emergency humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people were being hindered by the blockade imposed by Israel, which continued to limit freedom of movement for all, including United Nations staff, and to restrict the flow of foodstuffs and construction materials in violation of the Geneva Conventions and international human rights and humanitarian law. His Government called on Israel to lift the blockade immediately and to allow Agency personnel to freely enter Palestinian territories and to ensure that emergency supplies were readily available to the Palestinian people. His Government was concerned at the unprecedented increase in forced displacement and the demolition of homes and economic assets in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, which was having a severe impact on living conditions there. His Government called on Israel to end its unlawful settlement activities in and illegal occupation of the occupied territories immediately.

30. **Mr. Hattrem** (Norway) said that it was regrettable that a just solution for Palestine refugees had not been reached. Protecting their fundamental rights in accordance with international law was crucial for lasting peace. His Government urged the parties to resume credible negotiations to resolve outstanding issues.

31. UNRWA played a crucial role in supporting Palestine refugees by providing humanitarian assistance, health and education services, and employment opportunities in spite of a challenging and unpredictable political environment. Priority should be given to the most vulnerable groups of Palestine refugees. Norway was committed to supporting the Agency's efforts to deliver core services to Palestine refugees in all five fields of operations. His Government also recognized the key role the host countries played in supporting the Agency's operations. The Agency's unsustainable financial situation was worrying in view of growing demands on its services, but it had taken commendable steps to improve its performance and implement austerity measures. His Government supported the recommendation to increase assessed contributions to UNRWA and the exploration of ways to provide additional support from the Organization's regular budget beyond international staff. It also welcomed the Agency's efforts to expand its donor base.

32. **Mr. Zaayman** (South Africa) said that poor security, political and economic conditions had made Palestine refugees increasingly reliant on UNRWA for essential services and vital humanitarian assistance. Throughout its existence, the Agency had improved the lives of Palestine refugees through health-care and social assistance services and a transformative microfinance programme. Despite operating under difficult political and security conditions, the Agency had a great impact on the lives of Palestinian youth, through its education programme, and the elderly, who relied on the Agency's health services.

33. A long-term political solution to the conflict could be achieved only with the Palestinian people being able to fully exercise their legitimate right to self-determination. To that end, Member States needed to address the humanitarian needs of Palestine refugees through meaningful actions. His delegation called on the Israeli Government to cease settlement construction in the Palestinian West Bank, which had created a negotiation impasse, and to immediately lift the unconscionable siege of Gaza, which was having psychosocial effects that would have catastrophic consequences. The international community had a duty to ensure that the Agency was working on a sound financial basis, and South Africa would therefore continue to provide financial support to the Agency as well as humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people through the India, Brazil and South Africa Facility Fund for Poverty and Hunger Alleviation (IBSA Fund). Moreover, in cooperation with the Palestinian authorities and other international organizations, it would continue to support projects in Nablus and Gaza.

34. His Government fully supported the recommendations that the Secretary-General had made in his report on the Agency's operations (A/71/849) on ways to ensure that the Agency's funding was sufficient, predictable and sustained for the duration of its mandate. His Government would support making a larger allocation for UNRWA from the regular budget for the biennium 2018–2019 and would work with financial institutions of which it was a member to find other sources of funding for the Agency. The Agency's support for the millions of Palestine refugees was proof of the commitment of the United Nations to the just cause of the people of Palestine. The support of the international community must continue until a political solution was found, ensuring the creation of a Palestinian State coexisting peacefully alongside Israel within the 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital.

35. **Mr. Arcia Vivas** (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) said that UNRWA played a vital role in alleviating the suffering of Palestine refugees in the face of the mounting violence, marginalization and poverty caused by half a century of oppressive and illegal Israeli occupation and the resulting protracted displacement. The human rights violations perpetrated by Israel had begun with the Nakba and had forced Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, the Gaza Strip and neighbouring host countries to rely on the Agency's support. As a result, UNRWA was stretched to capacity as increasing numbers of Palestine refugees were in dire need of its services. The humanitarian crisis affecting the Palestinians could be overcome only by resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which was the root cause of regional turmoil. Such a solution would hinge on the occupying Power's withdrawal, the lifting of the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip, the return of Palestine refugees to their land and the establishment of an independent Palestinian State. If the international community failed to act decisively on behalf of the Palestinian cause, all other measures, including the valuable work of UNRWA, would be merely palliative.

36. His delegation rejected the continued Israeli territorial expansion in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, in particular through the illegal settlements that had resulted in tragic home demolitions in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Those measures had led to a spike in the number of displaced persons and refugees, placing an additional burden on the Agency. Meanwhile, the inhumane Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip had devastated the living conditions of 1.3 million Palestine refugees. Faced with rampant poverty and unemployment, roughly 80 per cent of the population of Gaza was unable to live with dignity and was forced to

depend on international assistance. Closures and access restrictions continued to limit the movement of people, goods and services to Gaza. The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela therefore demanded that Israel, the occupying Power, lift all restrictions imposed on the Gaza Strip.

37. The work of UNRWA staff, deployed in a region in which complex political situations demanded a level of impartiality and efficiency rarely witnessed in United Nations agencies, was praiseworthy. His delegation lamented the deaths, disappearances and detentions of Agency staff and urged all parties to respect the neutrality and refrain from endangering the security of UNRWA facilities and personnel, in accordance with international law. The steps taken by UNRWA to improve its efficiency and the quality of its services had enabled the Agency, through its skilled workforce composed of members of Palestine refugee communities, to provide humanitarian assistance to millions of Palestinians promptly and effectively. The Agency's efforts to implement its medium-term strategy for 2016–2021, particularly in the areas of education and health, were equally laudable.

38. The budgetary problems facing UNRWA were especially outrageous given the unsustainable situation of over 5.3 million Palestine refugees. His delegation wondered how it was possible for the occupying Power to demand neutrality and transparency from the Agency when Israeli occupation was absolutely illegal and contrary to all United Nations resolutions. Furthermore, it was inconceivable that certain Security Council members that had used their veto power to help perpetuate the illegal occupation of Palestine would dare to attach conditions to their contributions. The international community must support the adoption of a General Assembly resolution guaranteeing UNRWA a budget that would enable it to carry out its humanitarian mandate. Given that UNRWA was not a counter-terrorism agency, resources could not be withheld on the basis of arguments that ignored the nature of the Agency's work and mandate. His delegation welcomed the Secretary-General's recommendations on ensuring that funding for UNRWA was sufficient, predictable and sustained. Member States must ensure that Israel, as the occupying Power, fulfilled its obligations under the Fourth Geneva Convention in order to facilitate the Agency's work while awaiting a just, lasting solution to the Palestine refugee question. To that end, along with the overwhelming majority of the international community, the Venezuelan Government supported the two-State solution to the question of Palestine and the establishment of a State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, existing side by side and in peace with Israel within 1967 borders.

39. **Mr. Vieira** (Brazil) said that his delegation paid homage to the professionalism and impartiality of UNRWA staff, the vast majority of whom were refugees themselves. As a member of the Agency's Advisory Commission, Brazil would maintain its resolute support for the Agency, which provided vital humanitarian assistance to over 5 million Palestine refugees, in addition to fostering local economic development by generating employment and offering microfinance to refugee communities, thereby promoting stability in a highly volatile region. It also commended the Agency's efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment through its gender equality strategy for 2016–2021.

40. UNRWA must be provided with adequate and predictable financing, and his delegation supported the absorption of its essential operational costs by the assessed contributions of the United Nations regular budget. In addition, donations to the Agency should be frequent, predictable, non-earmarked and flexible, respecting the priorities set by the Agency and prioritizing contributions to the UNRWA General Fund. It was also necessary to raise awareness among new donors. Despite the General Assembly's failure to adopt draft resolution A/71/L.79 on the Agency's financing, his delegation welcomed the inclusion of significant parts of that draft in the annual resolution on the operations of UNRWA and hoped that the initiative would yield substantive results.

41. In recent years, his Government had increased its cooperation with UNRWA through voluntary financial contributions and food assistance, as well as bilateral and multilateral initiatives, including medical projects implemented by the India, Brazil and South Africa Facility Fund for Poverty and Hunger Alleviation in Gaza. However, the Agency's highly positive role notwithstanding, it had never been intended to be a permanent fixture. Without progress towards a just and lasting resolution of the question of Palestine, the protracted crisis affecting Palestine refugees would continue. The right of return remained a key element of the only formula that would reconcile the legitimate rights and aspirations of both nations, namely, a two-State solution providing for the end of the occupation and the establishment of an independent, democratic and viable State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital and within 1967 borders. Having recommended the partition of Mandate Palestine seventy years earlier, the General Assembly retained an important moral and legal responsibility to contribute towards the peaceful

resolution of the dispute between Israelis and Palestinians, including the issue of refugees.

42. **Ms. Mohd Taib** (Malaysia) said that the illegal blockade on the Gaza Strip had resulted in widespread restrictions on imports, exports and the movement of people, and its aggregate impact over a decade had been debilitating. The ongoing conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic had placed severe constraints on the delivery of humanitarian assistance by UNRWA, adversely affecting some 450,000 Palestine refugees. The situation of Palestine refugees in Jordan and Lebanon was equally dire. Her delegation was seriously concerned at the impact of armed violence on safe access by Palestine refugees to the Agency's health and education services. Moreover, the lack of legal status of Palestine refugees and the restrictions on employment, access to humanitarian assistance and legal recourse remained a matter of concern. The deteriorating situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip — a decline deliberately instigated by the occupying Power — continued to imperil the survival of the Palestinian people, including Palestine refugees. Malaysia called for the removal of restrictions on the movement of UNRWA staff and goods, which were inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations, the 1946 Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations and relevant United Nations resolutions.

43. Her delegation welcomed the recommendations of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA on the need to increase and sustain voluntary contributions to the Agency, given that the current reforms, while commendable, would not suffice to resolve the Agency's deficit. It also welcomed the initiatives highlighted in the Secretary-General's report on the operations of UNRWA (A/71/849), which were an encouraging sign of his commitment to ensure that UNRWA enjoyed sufficient, predictable and sustained funding going forward. Malaysia was a long-standing supporter of the Palestinian cause, and its most recent contribution of $120,000 to the Agency's work would supply Palestine refugees with food assistance.

44. **Mr. Alsabah** (Kuwait) said that the international community should put pressure on Israel, the occupying Power, to comply with international resolutions and cease its systematic destruction of Palestinian infrastructure and ongoing violations of the most basic human rights. Since the establishment of UNRWA in 1949, Kuwait had contributed over $162 million to the Agency, in the form of both regular and emergency donations. In 2016, the Government had pledged $5 million, and in 2015 it had made an emergency donation of $15 million to ensure continued schooling for some 500,000 Palestinian students. Between 2013 and 2015, it had allocated $50 million to support Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic. In 2009, it had contributed $34 million after Israel, the occupying Power, had destroyed some 36 UNRWA schools in Gaza. Lastly, his country had pledged $200 million over three years at the 2014 Cairo International Conference on Palestine: Reconstructing Gaza. In accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III), the Palestine refugees had the right of return and the right to live in peace, and Kuwait would continue to stand in fraternal solidarity with the Palestinian people as they sought full respect for those rights. His delegation also called for full implementation of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

45. **Ms. Özgür** (Turkey) said that UNRWA played a vital stabilizing role in a volatile region, and its services allowed Palestine refugees to enjoy key human rights, while ensuring their dignity and well-being. All Member States had the responsibility to continue extending political and financial assistance to UNRWA in order to enable the Agency to fulfil its mandate until a just solution to the Palestine refugee question was achieved. The year 2017 had been an important one in terms of mobilizing diplomatic and political support for UNRWA, particularly through the consultation process on ensuring sufficient, predictable and sustained funding for the Agency. Throughout the consultations, the international community had reaffirmed the Agency's mandate, the value of its work and the need to ensure that it continued to deliver effectively. The resulting recommendations of the Secretary-General, if implemented, could ensure the continuity of UNRWA services and end the recurrent financial shortfalls that continued to affect its programmes. However, achieving those goals was far from self-evident, in the light of the complex regional situation and the despair and anxiety of the Palestine refugee community. Despite those challenges, encouraging steps had been taken towards achieving unity among Palestinians, which was an important element for lasting peace. The international community must respond to those steps with a strong affirmation of the two-State vision and genuine efforts to end the protracted humanitarian crisis in Gaza. In that connection, addressing the immediate financial challenges of UNRWA was paramount, as the services it provided to Palestine refugees were far too essential to be threatened by interruptions in its funding.

46. While welcoming the reforms undertaken by UNRWA and its work to establish new funding mechanisms with international financial institutions, her delegation called on all stakeholders to mobilize the resources required to bridge the Agency's funding gap

for 2017. Turkey had increased its funding for UNRWA and had earmarked $100,000 of its contribution for the establishment of new revenue streams. As Chair of the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA and Vice-Chair of the Advisory Commission, Turkey stood ready to cooperate with all stakeholders on issues of importance to the Agency's agenda. Until a just and lasting solution to the Palestine refugee question was found, support for the Agency was critical for regional stability and the lives of millions of Palestinians.

47. *Mr. Almahmoud (United Arab Emirates), Vice-Chair, resumed the Chair.*

48. **Mr. Bouassila** (Algeria) said that his delegation appreciated the efforts of UNRWA to provide at least minimal levels of education, health care and housing to millions of refugees, especially in view of the Agency's ongoing budget deficit and the hardships suffered by the Agency's determined staff. The international community should do what was necessary to cover the Agency's ever-increasing shortfall and secure sustainable funding to allow Palestine refugees to live a dignified existence. In that regard, his delegation welcomed the recommendations contained in the Secretary-General's report on the Agency's operations (A/72/849) and commended the Agency on its efforts to overcome adversity and implement its medium-term strategy for the period 2016–2021, especially in the areas of education and health.

49. The devastating siege of Gaza, escalating levels of violent repression in the West Bank by the occupying Israeli forces, restrictions on movement, forced displacement, home demolitions and other flagrant violations being committed by the occupation authorities not only increased the despair and frustration of Palestine refugees, but also increased the burdens placed on UNRWA. His delegation condemned the restrictions placed by the Israeli authorities on the movement of UNRWA personnel in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including East Jerusalem.

50. The duty of UNRWA to ensure dignified living conditions for Palestine refugees should not be allowed to overshadow the ultimate need to reach a just and lasting settlement to the question of Palestine, including the issue of Palestine refugees. His delegation called on the international community to intensify its efforts to solve the decades-long humanitarian tragedy by ending the brutal Israeli occupation of Palestinian and Arab lands and enabling the Palestinian people to establish their own independent State with East Jerusalem as its capital, on the basis of the two-State solution, the Arab Peace Initiative and the relevant United Nations resolutions.

51. **Mr. Zambrano Ortiz** (Ecuador) said that, seventy years on, the mandate of UNRWA remained indispensable as Palestine refugees continued to face forced displacement, violence and a dire economic situation compounded by the illegal measures taken against Palestinians living under foreign occupation. Against that backdrop, his delegation acknowledged the long-standing commitment of UNRWA to contribute to the welfare and human development of generations of Palestine refugees by providing education, health care, social assistance, emergency relief and other services. States that were in a position to do so should increase their voluntary contributions to UNRWA to ensure that it had sufficient, predictable and sustained funds for the implementation of the Agency's medium-term strategy for 2016–2021. Lastly, he reaffirmed the unreserved support of Ecuador for the legitimate right of the Palestinian people to statehood and freedom from foreign occupation, and to exercise self-determination, in accordance with the fundamental principles of international law and the Charter of the United Nations.

52. **Mr. Naouali** (Tunisia) said that, seven decades on, Palestine refugees continued to struggle in extreme conditions with no sign that their right of return would be upheld. Throughout that time, UNRWA had been one of the most important actors on the ground and his delegation was therefore seriously concerned at the Agency's recurrent funding shortfalls, which undermined its efforts to meet the basic needs of Palestine refugees. Collective efforts were urgently needed to provide the Agency with the necessary support to overcome its large financial deficit, and his delegation welcomed the Secretary-General's call to explore all potential means of ensuring that funding for UNRWA was sufficient, predictable and sustained for the duration of its mandate. It commended the efforts of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the World Bank, the Islamic Development Bank and other stakeholders to resolve the Agency's financial crisis. Given that no single action could be expected to resolve the Agency's financial insecurity, concerted action was vital.

53. Tunisia was committed to contributing to alleviating the suffering of the Palestinian people, including Palestine refugees, and to transforming their socioeconomic and humanitarian conditions as a crucial element of reaching just and lasting solutions to all pending issues. His delegation commended Palestinian cooperation with all peace efforts and urged Israel to build confidence with the Palestinian side through, inter alia, the immediate and complete cessation of all settlement activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, in accordance with

international law and Security Council resolution 2334 (2016). Lastly, negotiations between the two parties must be resumed with the aim of achieving a just, lasting, comprehensive and peaceful two-State solution to the question of Palestine in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative.

54. **Mr. Listov** (Russian Federation) said that great upheavals in the Middle East region had made the Palestinian people seek refuge repeatedly, making them increasingly dependent on the assistance of the international community. UNRWA thus bore great responsibility in that regard, as it had become the de facto caretaker of those who were hostage to the Israeli-Palestinian impasse and regional conflicts.

55. Responding to the Secretary-General's call to ensure sufficient, predictable and sustained funding for the Agency, his Government had allocated $10 million to be transferred to the Agency in instalments over a period of five years from 2017 to 2021. His delegation consistently advocated ensuring predictable funding for the Agency. To that end it would consider consensus-based proposals regarding increasing the funds allocated to the Agency from the Organization's regular budget and would step up cooperation with international financial institutions. The Russian Federation also provided bilateral assistance to the Palestinian State and to Palestine refugees in Syria. Several hundred Palestine refugees were studying in Russian universities and received education stipends.

56. The Agency was carrying out important work in the Gaza Strip, where the humanitarian situation was dire. The recent conclusion of an intra-Palestinian agreement and progress towards the establishment of a single Palestinian authority would alleviate the humanitarian crisis and reduce the risk of large-scale violence. Palestine refugees were doubly affected by the internal conflict in Syria, and the Agency played a critical role in protecting the residents of the Yarmouk refugee camp near Damascus. Unlike many international humanitarian organizations, the Agency had maintained a neutral position over many years, in spite of external pressure. The Agency's work in Lebanon was particularly fraught, as the refugee camps there were under the control of autonomous armed groups that were often in conflict. With the addition of 1.5 million Syrian refugees, the challenge had grown significantly. As the situation in Syria stabilized, every effort should be made to support the return of the refugees to Syria, including by rebuilding critical infrastructure. By helping the Agency, States would contribute to the resolution of conflicts in the Middle East, part and parcel of which would need to include a just solution for Palestine refugees.

57. **Ms. Almatrooshi** (United Arab Emirates) said that her delegation was extremely concerned at the worsening humanitarian situation of Palestine refugees as a result of the violence and crises that plagued the region. The continued Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, forced displacement and rise in home demolitions had led to deteriorating Palestinian living standards and increasing demand for UNRWA services. To make matters worse, the Agency's financial crisis was jeopardizing its ability to perform its mandate. In that regard, her delegation welcomed the Secretary-General's efforts to ensure sufficient, predictable and sustained funding for the Agency, and called on Member States and other donors to increase their financial contributions to enable implementation of the recommendations contained in the Secretary-General's report on the Agency's operations (A/71/849).

58. On top of its regular annual voluntary donations to UNRWA, the United Arab Emirates had contributed an additional $15 million towards the Agency's operational budget in 2017, which, combined with other contributions, had helped to reduce the Agency's budget deficit from $126 million to $77 million. A number of leading Emirati institutions had helped to build schools, clinics and other facilities, in addition to providing food assistance to the Palestine refugees affected by the Syrian conflict. Her Government had also supported educational programmes for the benefit of over half a million Palestine refugee students since 2015, and had helped to further develop the work of the Agency through its membership of the Agency's Advisory Commission since 2014. The United Arab Emirates would continue to support UNRWA in any way possible to enable it to perform its vital mandate. However, while efforts to alleviate the suffering of Palestine refugees were essential, the only way to put an end to that suffering was to fundamentally resolve the refugee question in the context of a settlement of the question of Palestine in accordance with the relevant international resolutions, the Arab Peace Initiative and the Madrid principles. Lastly, she paid tribute to UNRWA personnel, who worked in extremely challenging circumstances to assist Palestine refugees and prevent the recruitment of young people by extremist groups. Her Government would continue to cooperate with the international community to tackle the various problems faced in the region, in particular in the field of humanitarian relief and development.

59. **Mr. Cheng** Lie (China) said that the international community must not forget the millions of Palestine refugees still in need of assistance in a volatile region.

The security and humanitarian challenges in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the Gaza Strip and Syria made refugee relief work increasingly difficult. All parties should step up their support to UNRWA and refugee host countries, and Israel should cooperate with international assistance efforts by lifting the blockade on the Gaza Strip. The ongoing Palestinian national reconciliation would also be conducive to alleviating the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

60. China appreciated the Agency's arduous work under harrowing conditions and the positive results it had achieved in spite of its funding shortfall, restrictions on movement and rampant insecurity. Its irreplaceable contributions to mitigating the suffering of the Palestinian people, protecting the rights of Palestine refugees and alleviating the pressures faced by host countries had helped to advance regional peace and stability, including by preventing the spread of terrorism and extremist ideologies in refugee camps. China had been providing assistance to the Agency for over thirty years and would continue to provide predictable and sufficient funding and to support the two-State solution and the establishment of an independent and sovereign State of Palestine within 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital. China would continue to work with all parties to seek a political solution in line with the Chinese President's four-point proposal on Israeli-Palestinian peace, which was the only way to resolve the Palestine refugee question.

61. **Ms. Krisnamurthi** (Indonesia) said that the almost impossible circumstances in which Palestine refugees lived were as saddening as the paltry finances keeping UNRWA active. There was a real risk that the Agency would have to make grave decisions that could jeopardize nearly every area of its mandate. As recently as September 2015, UNRWA had come within days of suspending its education programme in over 700 schools and placing its education workforce on mandatory leave without pay. Her delegation regretted that the Agency was obliged to operate in an increasingly violent and unstable environment and under such precarious financial circumstances, with the added burden of responsibilities related to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The dire financial situation threatening the Agency's operations and objectives was alarming, but it must not eclipse the fact that what was at stake was the right of human beings to live with dignity. The United Nations must therefore work to ensure sufficient, predictable and sustained funding for UNRWA. Moreover, the refugee problem was a global problem that the international community had a responsibility to solve. In that regard, Indonesia deplored the General Assembly's failure to adopt a resolution on the Agency's funding, to the detriment of UNRWA operations.

62. Her delegation fully supported the initiatives to establish a trust fund with the World Bank and an endowment fund with the Islamic Development Bank to help stabilize the Agency's long-term financial situation, and welcomed the valuable support for UNRWA provided by donors and regional partners. Lastly, the international community should act to ensure that Palestine refugees could exercise their rights in full, including the right of return and their right to compensation.

63. **Archbishop Auza** (Observer for the Holy See) said that UNRWA deserved the tangible support of the international community, particularly given the challenging operational environment resulting from armed conflicts and deteriorating humanitarian situations in the Middle East. The ongoing conflict in Syria was taking an alarming toll on both Palestine refugees and Agency staff, with the number of people in need of UNRWA services rapidly approaching the total number of Palestine refugees registered in that country. Thousands had been forced to leave their homes and had either become internally displaced or been forced to leave the country altogether. In addition to those challenges, the Agency's difficult and unstable financial situation persisted, as funding had not kept pace with the increased number and needs of Palestine refugees, who currently numbered around 5 million.

64. The only way to render UNRWA unnecessary was to implement General Assembly resolution 181 (III) fully; unfortunately, only half of its contents had been implemented to date. Recent attempts to move away from the two-State solution gave cause for grave concern, and the collapse in April 2014 of peace negotiations had led to negative unilateral actions and acts of violence stoked by inflammatory rhetoric from both parties. Straying from the Madrid peace process and the Oslo Accords had exacerbated the frustration and desperation felt by the Palestinian people. Resolving the question of Palestine would have a positive effect on other regional crises, ultimately allowing UNRWA to enjoy its much deserved retirement. Until the Palestine refugee question was adequately addressed, however, the Agency's work would remain invaluable to Palestine refugees who, without its support, would be living in even greater misery and deeper despair. The Holy See therefore reaffirmed its unwavering support for the right of both the State of Israel and a State of Palestine to live in peace within secure and internationally recognized borders in an atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation. If the

two parties did not agree to coexist peacefully — an outcome attainable only through the two-State solution — peace would remain a distant dream and security an illusion, and UNRWA, which had never been intended to be permanent, would remain vital.

65. The Agency's provision of crucial services to Palestine refugees was a safety valve that kept pent-up situations from exploding and minimized radicalization among them, thereby contributing to regional stability. Furthermore, UNRWA kept alive the values of humanity, solidarity and dignity despite major operational challenges. Like UNRWA, the Holy See and various entities and organizations of the Catholic Church provided education, health care and social services to Palestine refugees and to all in need regardless of creed. The Holy See continued to hope for the day when such services would no longer be needed.

66. **Mr. Krähenbühl** (Commissioner-General of UNRWA) thanked delegations for their recognition of the importance of the Agency's work in upholding the dignity of Palestine refugees, supporting humanitarian responses and contributing to the stability of both the refugees and the region as a whole. He also expressed appreciation for the commitment of donor and host countries to continue engaging actively in support of Palestine refugees, and commended the efforts of Egypt as Chair of the Advisory Commission and Switzerland and Turkey for their leadership in the consultations on securing sufficient, predictable and sustained funding for UNRWA. The Secretary-General's determination and commitment to the Palestine refugee question so early on in his tenure were also laudable.

67. The many expressions of support were very important to UNRWA staff deployed across the region. However, Member State support had not sufficed to forestall the current, acute funding crisis. With a shortfall of $77.5 as at 6 November 2017, he would be forced to take difficult decisions in the absence of additional funding, including the possible suspension of a whole range of Agency operations. Member States would have a major role in determining what steps could be taken to avoid such a negative development; he therefore urged delegations to consider and propose practical solutions to address that year's shortfall. It was regrettable that progress towards a fully supported additional assessed contribution avenue had stalled for the moment, meaning that it would be necessary to seek other means to secure the funding that would have been obtained in that manner.

68. With regard to security, UNRWA was taking initiatives to improve security management, and that neutrality was vital to the Agency. In line with its practice, UNRWA would continue to address security issues head-on by naming the actors responsible — including Hamas if it was involved — and taking appropriate action, instead of sweeping issues of that nature under the carpet. The Agency would also remain steadfast in its defence of the dignity of Palestine refugees, hence its rejection of any and all references to "so-called refugees". Given that Palestine refugees were refugees under international law, such terminology was unacceptable.

69. The activities of a humanitarian organization always entailed the risk of creating dependency. However, when confronted with the question of whether the very existence of UNRWA alone fostered dependency or even hindered the attainment of peace between Israel and Palestine, he invariably responded that, unlike any other refugee, Palestine refugees could not choose to return to an independent State of their own in the continued absence of a two-State solution. That fundamental element maintained them in a refugee status that could and must be addressed as part of a comprehensive political solution agreed to by all parties. The Agency therefore continued to call for the political process to be revived. While UNRWA did not have a say in determining what the solution would be, the Agency saw fit to weigh in on such unresolved issues because it witnessed their human consequences first-hand and on a daily basis. However, it would ultimately be incumbent upon States to uphold their obligations to find a political solution, lest the issue persist for decades. For its part, UNRWA had no intention of constituting the sole prospect for Palestine refugee youth. To conclude, he thanked the Committee for its strong engagement and for renewing the Agency's mandate through 2020, sending a clear message to the Palestine refugee community that it had not been forgotten. In order to reinvest the momentum generated into the Agency's field responses, a joint effort would be needed to translate the formidable political support for UNRWA into sustainable funding.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.